

VZCZCXR08921
PP RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHPOD RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHMO #1276/01 1401137
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 201137Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3339
INFO RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4484
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4253
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 2787

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001276

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PREL PGOV KN RS
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN EXPERTS OFFER VIEWS ON NORTH KOREA

¶1. (U) This message is sensitive but unclassified and is not intended for Internet distribution.

¶2. (SBU) Summary. Russian experts on the DPRK see Pyongyang's April 5 missile test and subsequent announcement of withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks as a ploy to obtain further concessions from the international community. The need to play to the domestic audience on the "greatness" of North Korea's regime and conceal to the outside world its internal power struggles may also be factors. While the experts are split on the utility of a bilateral dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea, they strongly urge the patient engagement of Pyongyang and support the resumption of the Six-Party Talks as the only viable way to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. End Summary.

¶3. (SBU) This cable is based on a series of meetings with Russian academics and experts following Pyongyang's decision to withdraw from the Six-Party Talks, including a May 13 luncheon in honor of visiting Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks Sung Kim. The experts who have offered us their views include Deputy Director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) Vasiliy Mikheyev, IMEMO scholar Gennadiy Chufrin, Director of the PIR Center Anton Khlopkov, and former Russian ambassador to South Korea Georgiy Kunadze.

Pyongyang Playing Games

¶4. (SBU) In the Russian experts' views, Pyongyang's main purpose for the April 5 missile test and subsequent hard-line reaction to the UN Security Council response was to create a crisis in order to force a new round of negotiations on concessions from the international community. Vasiliy Mikheyev, who as early as last fall predicted that North Korea would manufacture a confrontation in 2009, most likely with a missile test, asserted that Pyongyang's fundamental goal for the Six-Party Talks was to prolong regime survival. The North Koreans, calculating that they had already gotten everything they could from the Bush Administration without irreversibly giving up their nuclear program, were playing the same game again with the Obama Administration by raising tensions, elevating the price for further negotiations, and once again prolonging regime life through the new concessions they hoped to receive. In this regard, Mikheyev warned that we should not discount the latest North Korean threat to conduct another nuclear test, though whether the DPRK could carry it out would depend on "technological availability."

Internal Conditions Also Playing a Role

¶5. (SBU) The experts also suggested that domestic political considerations played a role in the decision to conduct the missile test and react harshly to the UN Security Council response. A satellite launch, whose successful result was pre-cooked for internal media consumption, was meant to demonstrate the "greatness" of the regime and divert attention from the country's dire economic situation. The subsequent international condemnation of North

Korea's actions played to the regime's portrayal of a hostile international environment by justifying Pyongyang's call for further sacrifices from the population in order to devote even more resources to military purposes.

¶6. (SBU) Another reason for the DPRK's recent harsh rhetoric might have been the significant reshuffling within the top leadership, leading Pyongyang to demonstrate strength during a politically precarious time. IMEMO's Gennadiy Chufin, while noting that it was uncertain whether the changes had Kim Jong-Il's consent or demonstrated that Kim was no longer in full control of the government, assessed that some elements of the North Korean government were looking for more isolation, fearing that real contact with the outside world would threaten regime survival. The UN Security Council's response to the missile test thus played into the regime's hands, in his view, and provided an excuse for breaking off even the modest contacts afforded by the Six-Party Talks.

U.S. Engagement is Key, as is Multilateral Diplomacy

¶7. (SBU) The experts were unanimous that the U.S. should engage North Korea to induce its return to the negotiating table, rather than adopt a wait-and-see approach. Both Georgiy Kunadze and Chufrin pointed out that as long as the DPRK remained a reclusive and secretive regime, there would always be a degree of uncertainty about its internal decision-making process, whether its provocative behavior was due to brinksmanship or domestic instability, or about how much plutonium and nuclear technology it truly possessed. If there was indeed a power struggle occurring behind closed doors, not engaging North Korea would only strengthen the hardliners' position that Pyongyang did not need the outside world, while a patient

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engagement policy could help the more "reasonable" elements make the case that the Six-Party process offered advantages. In this regard, Mikheyev pointed out that a number of elites around Kim Jong-Il, particularly those who had served in North Korean diplomatic missions abroad, had gotten used to and secretly enjoyed their privileged access to international travel and the conveniences of the modern world. They would likely be the most receptive to U.S. engagement and might oppose overly reckless behavior that would threaten their way of life.

¶8. (SBU) The experts were split on the utility of a bilateral dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea. Chufrin and Khlopkov believed that North Korea would continue to stonewall efforts to bring it back to the negotiating table unless it received signals from the U.S. on a willingness to engage in bilateral discussions. Kunadze, on the other hand, warned that while the bilateral format had advantages -- parties could talk more freely and proceed faster -- it could spin off parallel China-North Korea and Russia-North Korea dialogues, through which Pyongyang could seek to exploit differences between partners. All agreed, however, that the resumption of the Six-Party Talks was crucial, as there was no other alternative to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. Maintaining five-party unity was particularly key in this respect, hence no bilateral dialogue should replace the Six-Party's multilateral format.

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